

The Humanitarian Interpreter Mediation Role

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Abstract:

By humanitarian interpreting is meant that act performed by interpreters working in organizations with humanitarian mandates. The task of these interpreters is hard to assume, their work being characterized by a need to adapt to a variety of contexts, ranging from conflict zones, to refugee camps and even to terrorism trials, to cite only these. The questions that impose themselves in this context are the following: to what extent are present day humanitarian interpreters capable of delivering humanitarian aid across language and cultural barriers? Are they sufficiently trained to face misunderstandings, interpreter bias, emotional involvement and cultural differences? In an attempt to answer these questions, the present paper intends to underline the challenges and opportunities in the provision and use of humanitarian interpreters.

Key words: camps -challenges -conflict zones – humanitarian aid- interpreter-refugees.

ملخص:

نشير عند الحديث عن الترجمة الشفوية في مجال المساعدة الإنسانية إلى ذلك العمل الذي يؤديه الترجمة الناشطين ضمن المنظمات الإنسانية. لاشك في أنه من الصعب الاضطلاع بمهمة هؤلاء الترجمة، حيث يتطلب عملهم التكيف المستمر مع العديد من المجالات والوضعية المختلفة بدءاً بمناطق الصراعات إلى مخيمات اللاجئين وصولاً إلى قضايا الإرهاب ومحاكمات المتهمين فيها. والأسئلة التي تتبادر لا محالة في مثل هذا السياق هي كالتالي: إلى أي مدى يمكن هؤلاء الترجمة في وقتنا الراهن تأدية مهامهم وتجاوز الحواجز اللغوية والثقافية؟ وهل تحصلوا على التكوين اللازم والكافي لمواجهة سوء الفهم والتحيز والارتباط العاطفي والاختلافات الثقافية؟ ومحاولة منا للإجابة عن هذه الأسئلة، نسعى من خلال هذا المقال التأكيد على التحديات والفرص والإمكانيات المتاحة للترجمة لمساعدة هؤلاء اللاجئين للحصول على حقوقهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحديات-الترجمان-اللاجئين -المخيمات- المساعدة الإنسانية-مناطق الصراعات.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Humanity is always prone to helping those most in need ; yet the modern concept of humanitarian aid has only emerged since the second half of the twentieth century to give birth to a plethora of underpinning philosophies contributing to humanitarian action, among them Humanitarian interpreting. The latter term can cover a variety of situations , but to determine the limits of this article , it would be apposite to restrict it to those interpreting practices that fall within the legal framework of international Humanitarian Law and international Refugee Law that are aimed at enabling humanitarian organizations to communicate with public authorities and protected individuals in order to allow the latter to access their rights .The task of humanitarian interpreters is hard to assume, their work being characterized by a need to adapt to a variety of contexts, ranging from conflict zones, to refugee camps and even to terrorism trials, to cite only these. The questions that impose themselves in this context are the following: to what extent are present day humanitarian interpreters capable of delivering humanitarian aid across language and cultural barriers? Are they sufficiently trained to face misunderstandings, interpreter bias, emotional involvement and cultural differences? In an attempt to answer these questions, the present article intends to highlight the challenges and opportunities in the provision and use of humanitarian interpreting

1. The Challenging Face of Humanitarian Interpreting:

Humanitarian interpreting often happens in situations of conflict which usually require humanitarian action, that is, “saving lives, alleviating suffering or maintaining human dignity” (Bizimana, 2006 : 12). According to the United Nations Refugee Agency statistics (USA for UNHCR), over 68 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations ; of those, more than 25 million are refugees in the world and more than 30 million are asylum seekers. The context is characterized by a large diversity in languages and cultures. Quality communication is therefore absolutely essential, mainly in refugee camps and settings and some other contexts in which a large number of women and children seek assistance. And it is unlikely that these refugees, women and children are competent enough in foreign languages to interact with the humanitarian system as a whole. They are thus in great need of skilled interpreters to help them

navigate their new environment and overcome the profound linguistic and cultural differences that often exist between migrants and those who are to receive them.

The task of humanitarian interpreters is physically, emotionally and mentally challenging as they work in fragile environments, such as conflict and post-conflict contexts, refugees camps, refugees settings, contexts falling within the scope of application of international humanitarian law and human rights. Moreover, they pursue the missions of humanitarian organizations in situations of human suffering, including visas, detention, field hospitals, and interviews with victims of conflict and refugees seeking status determination. They also deal with persons often protected by international humanitarian law, like children, women, civilians, detainees and wounded or sick persons.

Given this variety of contexts, interpreters in humanitarian settings must become active participants who adapt to the situation at hand and implement deliberate strategies to manage the complications and even conflicts that emerge during these unscripted interactions. What makes the task more difficult is that they are compelled to work within the principles of humanitarianism the most important of which are: humanity, impartiality, confidentiality and respect for others 'cultures and customs. The ability to quickly establish trust in stressful situations when one often does not know the parties well is crucial for successful interpreting. At the same time, these interpreters must strive to maintain neutrality and refrain from offering helpful advice or projecting their own biases and beliefs onto the situation. They may feel sympathy for the applicant but they are not allowed to act as his advocate; they must not let any personal judgment of the content of the message nor prejudices against the parties involved guide what they interpret nor how they interpret it. On the other hand, it is standard practice for humanitarian interpreters to maintain strict confidentiality as to the content of any discussion to which they are party. This requirement must apply rigidly to interviews for refugee status. Revealing facts that concern a refugee's story could be of great danger for the applicant. It is equally important to respect and honor the differences of others. Humanitarian interpreters will eventually interact in some way with a culture that is different from their own; they have thus to be culturally responsive, open to the viewpoints, thoughts and experiences of others. In short, they have to internalize humanitarian principles and be able to cope with specific demands and realities in any context, be it in conflict zones, in disaster zones or even in refugee camps

2. Interpreting in Conflict Zones

A globalized society cannot function without translators and interpreters. More so, in conflict zones where they assist as language bridges transcending conflict. The term ‘conflict zone’ typically refers to a war zone and is usually across borders. Therefore, it is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment where clear and honest communication is vital. Interpreters operating in such situations are often non-professional linguists yet play a key role in communication. They are usually contracted by the army, the United Nations peacekeeping forces, ministries of foreign affairs of different governments, humanitarian NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations) and journalists.

Among the conflict zone interpreters are military interpreters whose primary role is to support soldiers with their words and promote peace and understanding among the fighting sides through communication; they also assist officers at military traffic control points, at combat troops in the field and at the public affairs office. Civilian interpreters, for their part, provide the majority of interpretation services in conflict zones, from accompanying on patrol to interpreting during key leader engagements. Being either foreigners hired locally or native speakers of the target language, they are recruited and managed by private companies to the host country government. As to humanitarian interpreters, they work on the ground with international aid and news organizations, like the Red Cross, NGO’s and *médecinssans frontières*. They also accompany journalists who travel around the world to cover important events, like the Arab Spring in Egypt and Northern Africa, the Sudan crisis or even natural disasters.

Serving as interpreter in a conflict zone is a challenging career choice for a linguist. It is not easy to work in a high – risk environment and facilitate interaction while being vulnerable to attacks. The lack of protection, the stress, threats and the constant fear of death can be extremely hard to cope with. Interpreters working in these zones place their lives at risk, and there are many instances where they have been kidnapped, tortured or killed. Some of them even end up with vicarious trauma.

In theory, their role is to facilitate communication, but in practice, several issues make the job very difficult. From a linguistic point of view, they could be withheld from rendering the exact meaning. In some cases, they could be hired as tools for organizations working to distort the message, and they accept the job either because of their own view or coercing or threat. This could lead to

intentional misinterpretation. They are therefore required to maintain ethics in conflict zones, a task which is not easy. Faithful or unprejudiced reproduction is very hard for war interpreters since societal values during conflict and at time of peace are totally different. Neutrality is harder.

Interpreters are often viewed as representing the voice of those for whom they are performing the interpretation. In conflict zones, the lines are more blur, and the local population tends to view them and the soldiers as being on the same team. They consider them in areas of war and political unrest as traitors although they are just sandwiched in the middle. So, they treat them as their enemies and hurt them down. In Afghanistan, for example, the rebels pay rewards for information that may lead to capturing an interpreter. The organization employing them may suspect them for compromised ethics. They are thus vulnerable to threat from both sides. Often, they are forced to live in hiding or under disguised identities to save their lives, especially if they are from the local community. Unlike combatants, they do not carry weapons for protection or wear special uniforms. Neither do they receive any special status for protection, like doctors, nurses and journalists in war zones.

What is disappointing is that many Western governments still do not recognize the debt of gratitude they owe to the local interpreters without whom their troops could not have operated in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan- and without whom they will not be able to intervene in any future operations on foreign soil. However some organizations and some international language associations are working and even fighting for better laws to protect them today in conflict zones. They are pushing for a United Nations resolution similar to the one for journalists that will grant them specific protection under international law. In an ideal world, these less- heard -of war heroes should be offered honor and protection. They should be free to work without fear of persecution, abduction or assassination, were it only for the noble task that they accomplish, not only in conflict zones but in refugee camps as well.

3. Interpreting in Refugee camps

Refugee camps are hastily built shelters intended as a temporary accommodation for people who have been forced to flee their country because of violence and persecution. It is important to know that ,according to « the Borgen Project »,a non-profit association addressing poverty and hunger , among the 30

million refugees around the world, 53 percent come from Somalia (1 million), Afghanistan (2.7million) and Syria(4.8 million) and are hosted mainly in the Middle East, North Africa , Turkey and some European countries .These newcomers need to be settled in camps where they are registered , delivered lifesaving aid like food ,clothes, medical attention, education programs and other services. The major difficulty encountered in these camps is the linguistic diversity: aid workers and refugees often come from different contexts and they rarely share a common language.

Significantly, the majority of these refugees apply for asylum. And for each asylum application, several interviews are necessary with different authorities and organizations, and for each of those interviews, interpreting is required .It would be impossible to go through the different processes to obtain asylum, but also to provide social support without the help of interpreters who are the linguistic and cultural mediators between the two parties. Without interpreting services, then, asylum seekers can lose the rights granted to them by the international humanitarian law. But these transcultural agents are extremely scarce. It is very difficult to find professional/trained interpreters to cover all those needs.

And to provide a remedy for that shortage of trained interpreters, very often stake holders in fragile contexts recruit untrained interpreters most likely on the basis of their alleged language skills only to serve as bridge figures between refugees and aid workers. These interpreters are most of the time community interpreters, sometimes even talented refugees who have capacities in multiple languages. Being informal, they are often unaware of the ethical codes and principles of professional interpreting. The results can be very harmful for all the parties involved. Asylum seekers need access to information that they can trust, in a language that they can understand. During asylum interviews, for example, the dark spots that are generally underlined are incompetence in one language or both, misunderstandings, terminological gaps, interpreter bias and emotional involvement. Some untrained interpreters go as far as to switch from the first to the third person singular within the same interpreting assignment ; some leave out important information or fail to get across an important point made by a refugee, a fact which could lead to a wrong decision being made about that person by the authorities. Some others even add their personal opinion to what is said. And all this non-professional practice is due to a lack of training.

Conclusion

The lack of interpreting services is one of the major barriers to the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance in conflict zones, refugee camps and many other situations. Non-profit organizations , like In Zone and TWB (Translators Without Borders),being aware of the impact this noble profession can have on everyone involved in a humanitarian situation, dedicate themselves to training interpreters who work for humanitarian efforts and to connecting them with contexts that need interpreting resources to bridge these gaps .For their part, Interpreters, being considered as a critical information link for aid seekers and refugees, from health care to food, shelter, refugee procedures or accommodation information, have to develop different strategies to be able to adapt to different situations and contexts. They have to define their own role to meet the expectations of their employers as well as those of aid seekers and the refugees themselves. They should be aware that conflicts ensue only when communication breaks down and that resolving these conflicts successfully relies heavily on re-establishing communication. They should also know that almost all conflicts involve parties who do not speak the same language or share the same culture. They are thus the main vehicle of communication under such difficult circumstances. The degree of trust that is placed on them, the magnitude of their responsibility necessitate high , uniform ethical standards that will both guide and protect them in the course of their duties. An established code of ethics is thus necessary to protect them and to lessen the arbitrariness of their decisions by providing guidelines and standards to follow.

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